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ABSTRACT

This essay is based on a federal analyst's 26-year career in government, particularly the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. It addresses rural living and quality of life as well as changes that have occurred over the past two decades and planning for the future. The special training needs of rural educators are discussed, and distance learning options are recommended as a means for enriching rural curricula. It suggests that the federal role in reducing inequities in rural schools requires a complete overhaul rather than tinkering at the edges. Because few national leaders in education spring from rural settings, more collaboration among the National Rural Education Association and educational laboratories is needed as one means to focus attention on rural education issues. Other recommendations are that collaborative research efforts among concerned agencies and associations should increase, and that the poorest of the poor counties should receive special government intervention involving integrated services rather than just education. In a discussion of rural education research and research needs, it is noted that only fairly recently has National Assessment of Educational Progress data been analyzed by metropolitan-nonmetropolitan county type and that this revealed essentially no difference in scores. The essay concludes with a delineation of major policy improvements over the period and hope for an even better climate for understanding and assisting rural schools in the years ahead. (RAH)

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REFLECTIONS OF A RECENTLY RETIRED FEDERAL ANALYST IN RURAL EDUCATION

Joyce Stern

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Reflections of a Recently Retired Federal Analyst in Rural Education

Joyce D. Stern

Since deciding last May to accept the opportunity to retire from the federal government and become an independent consultant, I have had little time to reflect on my years at OERI where I served as rural liaison to the regional educational laboratories, departmental liaison to the National Rural Education Association, and general representative on rural issues. And so, I welcomed the invitation to do so for this newsletter, which will reach so many of my colleagues, remembered with such fondness. I must say I enjoy working from my home office. I currently am engaged in a major project for the National Education Association on state accountability systems, but still often get "rural" calls from OERI and others, most recently *The New York Times*. And I just completed serving as a guest editor for NREA's upcoming *Rural Educator*, too, so you see I remain very much involved. Now here are some thoughts about aspects of the rural world that were suggested as a structure for this article.

Rural Living. As the problems of urban society increase, rural life will grow correspondingly attractive, but either as an abstract ideal or reshaped to meet modern needs. Barring Biblical-scale cataclysms, I doubt if there will be anything like a massive exodus to the hinterlands. Rather, a pattern like the one I have witnessed in the DC area over the last 25 years will continue. Center cities will lose population and decay, while the suburbs will extend deeper into what used to be the countryside. After all, except for survivalists and other hardy souls, few folks anymore really want to be **that** far from urban conveniences. Close-in "rural" will increasingly be transformed out of existence. Who would have thought even 10 years ago that a superhighway could enable a Washingtonian in under 1-1/2 hours to plunk down in a West Virginia vacation home for the weekend? And it is common, though jarring, to see Civil War-vintage Virginia and Maryland hamlets abutted by discount outlets and housing developments. I keep thinking, "What is wrong with this picture?" But that is the future, and as someone said just a moment ago, "The future is now."

The federal role in protecting disintegrating rural communities is limited. Wise planning by the locals, with the help of some federal funds, can help. But without a long-term vision and alternative strategies coming from within the community, no amount of federal aid will rescue a foundering community. Part (and only a part) of the problem, too, is that America is a throw-away society. We throw away tin cans and pop bottles, and we throw away whole towns and villages—whole cities, in fact. I am not an urban planner or an economist, so I cannot shed much light on how this could happen on the scale we have seen in the last 3-4 decades. I just know that there are some European and Asian countries where this has been avoided, notably France and Japan.

Government policies of zoning and subsidy promote the existence of viable villages, towns, and small cities throughout the land. It is in the interest of the well-being of society and the government to have the population thus fairly widely distributed and not forced to flock to a few urban centers in search of a livelihood. In these countries, relatively more people grow up and stay in their place of birth or return, because there is employment, services, education, and a viable community in which to rear the next generation. We need to learn the secret of their success in main-

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taining thriving communities and avoiding the material waste and human distress of having them decline and be discarded.

As for education, I see nothing in the literature that suggests state legislatures are going to maintain rural schools for purely sentimental reasons. More than ever, costs will dictate school closings, and improved highway systems will make consolidation easier except in mountainous terrain or where distances are truly vast. And that is too bad. Rural schools I visited in different parts of the country, thanks to arrangements by my laboratory colleagues, were running great educational programs—with minimal resources.

What made them "great" in my eyes was the commitment of staff and the relative innocence of the students, which permitted them to be really open to the world of ideas, and at the same time treat the school as an extension of their families. Do not think I am naive about these things. Societal pollution has tainted Rural America, too, as statistics on crime, delinquency, teen pregnancies, and drug use, usually alcohol, demonstrate. And shortly after visiting a particularly wonderful school (in Oklahoma), I learned the obdurate school board had terminated its gifted principal, beloved of the children and teachers. It was truly sad. But this kind of thing can happen anywhere, alas.

What makes rural schools special, or at least allows them to have that perpetual potential for specialness, is the very thing their advocates tout—smallness and a sense of community with shared values. Though not in a rural environment, I knew these virtues up close with the education of my own children in a suburban parochial school. These attributes count. They really can make the difference as to the **quality of the child** that is produced after 12 years. Creative ways to maintain small-by-choice schools should be encouraged to the maximum extent possible.

And finally, the issue of poverty. Is a poor child more disadvantaged in a rural or an urban area? Urban poverty today is coupled with extreme physical dangers that make many of the discomforts of rural poverty a less stressful alternative. The operative question is - where? There are many rural places where poverty would be tolerable, indeed, compared to being poor, and therefore more vulnerable, in any urban center you can name these days.

Teacher Preparation. Without question, special preparation is needed to be a rural teacher. The isolation and the insularity of some communities can be daunting to a newcomer. The only way to thrive is to know what to expect and what is expected, much like a Peace Corps volunteer is readied for assignment. For this reason, perhaps the best rural teachers are homebred. Having gotten their educations, they come back to nurture their communities. There is no need for adjustment or for the community to get used to them, and expectations are realistic. But even these teachers should get special training in, for example, distance learning options, which can make the difference, say, between a deficient and an enriched rural high school curriculum. The unfortunate thing is how little is done to prepare candidates to teach in rural areas, or to recruit and train local people to take up the profession. This topic is begging for attention.

The Federal Role. Fiscal inequities among schools are appalling, and rural schools are especially affected. It is taking forever to achieve equity of resources through the courts. Yet, that seems to be the only route available, the Supreme Court having decreed that the issue is beyond the scope of the federal government. We anxiously watch the progress of full-scale, court-ordered reform in Kentucky and now Alabama. We need their success to point the way. I see a time, perhaps 50 years off, when there is equitable funding **within** a state and, yes, opportunity to learn, while the federal government augments the education resources of poor states like Mississippi in a simple formula grant program, sort of like a large-scale Title I. The days of tinkering around the edges will then be over.

Meanwhile, local control of schools is both a national virtue and a national burden. It has long been my belief that school boards

are a wonderful training ground for leaders in a democratic society as is community involvement in the schools. At the same time, parochialism can retard progress for generations. State mandates are the best antidote. It is no coincidence that rural scores began to improve when state reforms mandated minimal levels of instruction for **all** children. Those mandates stretched rural schools and the exercise did them good.

But in the meantime, those in a position to do so—like the laboratories, CEDaR, and NREA—need continually to remind federal decision makers that rural schools deserve equitable attention. Those at all levels of policymaking need those reminders. But calls for help must be balanced with information about high quality rural schools. Friends of rural education did much during my years of OERI to bring new respect for rural education as something far more than the country cousin to be looked down upon. As we took pains to point out in "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools," many of the new reforms being promoted, like peer tutoring, were innovations born of necessity in rural schools.

Leadership. Most of the national personalities in education today, like Ted Sizer or Lauren Resnick, spring from urban and academic settings. It is no understatement to say that most of them do not see rural schools as where the action is; some even fail to take them into account. Rather, the problems of urban society and the sheer mass of the population involved challenge these thinkers and innovators to focus on urban settings. This needs to change and I believe it has been changing. Governors from largely rural southern states redefined education reform in the mid and late '80s. And at the national level, the rural "lobby" is small, but effective. The attention finally being paid to rural schools is their handiwork.

But more needs to be done to bring rural schools into the spotlight on a continuing basis. NREA has the right idea in featuring national leaders at its annual convention—as much for the benefit of the invitee as for the attendees. This should continue to be the practice, as well, of smaller rural operations that hold importrant conferences, like those at Kansas State University and the University of Oklahoma. The laboratories, now housing a significant concentration of individuals skilled and knowledgeable in the field, are uniquely situated to bring the rural perspective to the fore. Rural program directors can both see that rural issues are aired in their organizations and present the rural perspective on larger issues laboratories address, such as standards, curriculum frameworks, and education dissemination.

Finally, there definitely should be more collaboration between NREA and the laboratories. For example, much that the rural program directors achieve in rural schools should find its way into NREA publications—*The Country Teacher* and *The Rural Educator*—and be featured at the annual convention. At the same time, I would like to applaud NREA's demonstrated sensitivity in bringing in new researchers and practitioners and featuring them in the publications and at the conventions. Collaboration, growth, and change are integral to what should be a seamless process.

Research. Based for a decade in the Department's research unit, I cannot close without saying a few words about research in rural education. A new liaison to the laboratories for the rural initiative may or may not be named. Budget restraints, plus the existence of a new rural program elsewhere, may preclude it. That will force the laboratories to take on an even greater proactive role in this arena. We who care about rural education know that research on rural education is a real stepchild. Yet, there are thousands out there who could benefit from more information on, for example, teacher recruitment and training (as mentioned above) and tapping the potential of technology.

And, I was heartened to see in the last RE/SIG Newsletter that the collaborative initiative I began with the laboratories and the National Center for Education Statistics, to train rural researchers in the Center's data bases, is continuing. It also seems like an excellent idea to have the work of the Rural SIG and the

NREA Research Forum integrated. It offers the hope for continued growth of the rural presence within AERA and enrichment of the Forum.

For me, one of the most noteworthy findings for the "condition" report project I directed was how well rural students perform. The expectation was that scant resources and comparatively limited offerings would drive performance down. To a large degree, material deficiencies seem to have been offset by a combination of state mandates and something intangible—that rural school ethos, perhaps. We need to know more about the intersection of these two phenomena and how they play out in different rural settings.

For example, shortly before the report came out, I came upon some unpublished research out of the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service where, for the first time, 12th grade data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were analyzed by county type. I want to stress that this had never been done before with NAEP data. I could only mention it in passing in the report (p. 54), but it deserves major exploration because it revealed that there was essentially no difference in scores by county type (met vs. nonmet) and that any low rural performance was concentrated in the smallest, most remote counties. Factoring out those counties suggests rural performance generally could be even higher than we thought. And that in terms of policy, those poorest of the poor need special intervention, in my view, along the lines of integrated services, not just education per se.

Conclusion. Working on behalf of rural education during my final years in the civil service was the most rewarding period of my 26-year career in government. Tremendous strides were made in terms of improved policy favoring rural schools and output of information about rural education. These are just the major ones that come to mind: President Bush inaugurated a new rural development policy; the OERI rural initiative prospered; a rural research agenda and a major report about rural education were published; NCES widely expanded the variety and scale of its data gathering, and inclusion of a "rural" variable opened up the potential for unprecedented knowledge about rural schooling; the National Science Foundation launched a mathematics and science program benefitting rural schools; the scope and vision of the AERA Rural SIG grew significantly; and the Elementary and Secondary Education legislation was amended to include a major new rural program. It was an exciting time. And building upon this firmer foundation, we may anticipate an even better climate for understanding and assisting rural schools in the years ahead.

Editor's Note:

We appreciate Joyce's willingness to share with us her reflections on her experience at OERI.

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